

〈資 料〉

Basil Fernando: Six Short Stories of Sri Lanka

Le Roy Robinson

Basil Fernando, an attorney, is a poet and short story writer.

He was born in October 1944 at Palliyawatte, a village in Handala, Wattala, Sri Lanka.

As a young boy he attended the village primary school.

He attended high school at St. Anthony's College, Wattala, and St. Benedict's College, Kotahena.

In 1972 he graduated from the Faculty of Law, the University of Ceylon, Colombo.

Until December 1981 he was a teacher of English as a second language in the Sub-Department of English, Sri Jayawardenapura University, Nugegoda.

In 1982 he began his legal practice.

In 1984 Basil Fernando started working as a human rights lawyer. He filed many writs of habeas corpus and handled other cases allegedly involving torture or extra-judicial killing by the security forces of his country.

In 1989 four of his immediate colleagues were killed within a period of six months, and Fernando was warned by a police officer friendly to him that his safety could not be guaranteed.

In September 1989 he took up work as an appeals lawyer stationed in Hong Kong by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. He reviews cases of Vietnamese refugees.

Basil Fernando is very outspoken in trying to raise international concern for Sri Lanka, where, he claims, the rate of violent deaths has recently risen to among the highest in the world.

He has said: "The practice of law provides a writer with a great deal of information on what is happening in society".

Edited by Le Roy Robinson, the following six short stories provide foreign readers a great deal of information about what is happening in present day Sri Lanka. Realistic in mode and somewhat ironic in tone, these stories express Basil Fernando's disturbance at certain unsavory aspects of social life in his country.

"Albert the Murderer", for example, attempts to show an aspect of the way of life of the Indian subcontinent, where part of the social psychology encourages passivity and discourages action.

The reasons for this particular social psychology relate to the peculiar historical development of the area, whose economy even up to the present has been predominantly agricultural, whose religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism contribute to it, and whose many years of feudalism and subjugation to foreign exploitation have contributed to re-inforce it.

Whatever the origins of this social psychology, for Basil Fernando it remains a hindrance, a tremendous psychological barrier, preventing masses of people from coping with the problems of the modern age.

As Fernando has said, even during the renaissance period of Asian culture following the surge against colonialism, encouragement of passiveness was glorified as an aspect of "the Asian mind" that makes it superior to "the Western mind".

In the recent carnage in Sri Lanka, Basil Fernando points out, we have continuously witnessed the same kind of brutality also seen in other Asian countries that is the other side of this social psychology.

The shame that accompanies recent Asian history demands that

writers look more closely and critically into the history of their countries.

In "Albert the Murderer" Basil Fernando examines a social psychology that cannot integrate passiveness with aggressiveness or retreat with action.

In "Konaiya" Basil Fernando describes certain aspects of rural and suburban people's lives in Sri Lanka. Konaiya is caught between two sub-cultures. His unconscious mind belongs to rural Sri Lanka, and in the depths of that mind there is resistance to foreign rule. But Konaiya lives among Catholic neighbors. Catholicism was brought into Sri Lanka in the 16th century by Portuguese. Catholic areas on the coast were more exposed to foreign influences. The inner differences between these two sub-cultures still persist.

In "When Will They Be Free?" Fernando reflects on the limitations of the leftist movement in Sri Lanka from the 1960s onwards. Litus is a symbol of great dedication and sacrifice wasted in absurd situations in which he is cornered. The relationship between Litus and his friends reflects that of people who look for solutions to the problems of their society but find it difficult to discover any.

"Tourism Drive" predicts the future. In fact, the shopping hours in Colombo have already changed, and, according to Fernando, there is an open invitation to "night life" in an attempt to promote "sex tourism". What Fernando notices is that a new type of woman, personified in the story by Mrs. Wijepala, has come to prominence.

In "The Old Man and the Canal" Basil Fernando relates the massacres of the 1980s in Sri Lanka to those common during colonial times. He asks: Has the political independence of Sri Lanka, with local people taking over positions formerly held by foreigners up to 1948, fundamentally changed the ways of governing, of *ruling*? The very old canal and the old man are symbols of past and present, what happened then and what happens now.

"Eighteen Headless Bodies" is based on an actual incident. In October 1989 the headless bodies of eighteen young men were found at Peradeniya. At about the same time in other places in Sri Lanka about 400 people were killed. Basil Fernando says these events have destroyed many Sri Lankan pretenses, such as the claim to be a highly educated and sophisticated society. The professor in the story and Peradeniya University are symbols of that pretense. Fernando says it's not easy anymore to claim to be a Sri Lankan intellectual.

Albert the Murderer

Albert was the "samurai" of the village.¹⁾ That was why the villagers called him Minimaru Albert. They did that to insult him, blackmail him, corner him, and thereby justify their passiveness.

Joe recalled Santha telling him about Albert in a passionate way after Albert had died just a few months before.

All three of them belonged to a village near Colombo. Joe had come to the village about forty years back, after getting married. A civil servant then, he was very much sought after; he soon became very much a part of the village. Santha, who was the first university graduate of the village was about twenty years younger than Joe, and was eager to discuss village personalities. Of late he had become fascinated by what he had heard about Japanese samurai.

The people of the village always referred to Albert as Minimaru Albert. A long time before he had been accused of murdering someone, but after a trial the court had acquitted him as there was not enough evidence to prove the charge. But the court verdict did not change the people's views. They always referred to Albert as Minimaru Albert. In his absence. His children were called Albert the Murderer's children.²⁾

There was some sort of mercilessness towards Albert that was quite unusual to the villagers, who had always tried to show that that they were forgiving. They had been forgiving of corrupt politicians, bad priests, and even murderers.

People often forgive those who hurt them. But they are unforgiving of their own who challenge them — those who make them feel that they are afraid of themselves.³⁾

Joe remembered Albert well as a young man. For Albert was among the most manly men that Joe had seen in his life, judged by physical appearances, of course. Tall, well built, dark body, sharp features. Some ironlike quality. Albert had a quick walk, a very quick way of doing things. He was always looking for something to do. One may say he was always in search of action.

A favorite topic in the conversations between Joe and Santha was the habits of the people of this village. Santha was often critical of these villagers in a bitter way. Joe did not feel bitter, but he did agree that there was something in what Santha said.

"See our people," Santha would often say. "How they resent action. How they like to retire to their souls. How they see action as something that will ultimately bring trouble, suffering".⁴⁾

"Perhaps the people are not wrong," Joe sometimes argued, more with a view to provoke his younger friend than to make a point. Joe was one who liked to enjoy a good conversation. "You know the way Albert used to get beaten up by the police for things he had never done. Perhaps these people know from centuries of experience that that was how things always ended up".

"Well, I suppose you include Albert when you say always. You may win the argument by a dirty debating trick," Santha would say, adding "You people know how to say the wrong thing in such a way that it sounds right."

"You know that Albert never got intimidated by those beatings. He had contempt for those police worms who bravely assaulted a person as a gang when the fellow was already tied up. When any of them met Albert on the road he would put on a shy smile and disappear soon. Sometimes if two or three of them met him they would even tell him not to keep those things in mind. These things were common knowledge in the village. The villagers secretly appreciated these qualities. But they created the impression that they condemned him".

"But he did not die a hero. He died at the feet of the village people after going on his crutches to their doorsteps begging". Joe said this to see how angry his friend would be.

But Santha argued calmly, with a twist in his eyes, as if to say, Well, you are trapped now. I was waiting for you to talk about the begging.

"If you cut the wings of a bird could that bird be blamed for not behaving like a bird? You know how it happened. Some fellow was hired to kill Albert.⁵¹ But he was mortally scared of him. So he waits, waits until Albert is fast asleep, then chops his leg in the dark. Probably he thought he was cutting Albert's neck. Then at the hospital the doctors do not do anything at all to save the leg. Albert comes out of the hospital minus a leg. Yes, a bird without a wing. You can't fly with one wing. You have to have two.

It is not what happened to Albert that is important. But how happy (of course, secretly) the villagers were when they saw Albert going begging on crutches. They felt that their beliefs were confirmed. They told their children, Ah, that's a good example to learn from; if you jump too much you end up breaking your legs! And that way the people of the village once again mentally adjusted themselves to their unhappy lives."

"But," asked Joe, "in these circumstances would not a samurai commit suicide?"

"But Albert was a samurai who did not know that he was one," Santha

replied almost apologetically.

Konaiya

No one really knew the name of Konaiya. One may guess it as Koranaris, as, for example, the name of Manaiya was Manuel. But Manaiya was a Catholic, so it was not difficult to guess his name. But Konaiya was a Buddhist (though not a practicing one), and Koranaris was not a common Buddhist name.

Not that the name had any significance. Konaiya belonged to the large majority of Sri Lankan people those days whose lives were not considered in any way significant by themselves or by others. Konaiya himself would not have considered his name had any significance.

Perhaps the only thing that he may have considered important, judging by his utterances, is that he was not a part of the village in which he had lived most of his life. He had come to that village as a child of ten or so, but who knows? There was no significance in exact dates and times in the society (if you may call it that) in which he had lived the useful part of his life.⁸⁾ He said he had come from Matara and no one disputed that.⁹⁾

He had begun to work early — that is to say, as a child. Males grew up to work. That was the rule. Not that the people who took him to their house and gave him food to eat did so to get him to work. To say that would be very unkind.

For the people yet another person was never too much those days. A rice meal could be shared in a way that no one would feel that he or she did not have enough. A whole family could share a mango and still keep a piece for one who had not come home yet.

Playing and working happened together, and often continued that way for most of one's life. A grim seriousness and a carefree attitude to life co-ex-

isted.

When he was eighteen or so Konaiya could find his work on his own. The older women in the village began to tease him for not having a woman of his own. And then they found him a beautiful young girl from a neighboring village.

A villager allowed him to put up a little house in the back yard of his property. There was no fear of tenants and lessees then. And people could not think of charging any money for a small favor like that. If idle land could be put to use by some one, is it not better to allow him to use it than to leave it vacant? Villagers felt that there was some emptiness in a property unoccupied and in a person not married.

Despite all the favors the people did him Konaiya never felt part of the village even after living many decades in it.

He was a very proud man, the villagers sometimes said among themselves. Perhaps it was something different. Something mysterious like his childhood. A mysterious inability to assimilate.

He belonged to a people far far away. Though he did not know those people, and even though there were no such people anymore, it made no difference. He could not really belong to anything else.

Not that he made his life miserable because of it. He lived just as normally as everyone else. But the sense of belonging or not belonging is not something that you could acquire, as the past is something over which man had no power. The past lives within you without your having invited it. And in the case of Konaiya it overpowered his present.

Though he did not reason it out, he may have argued this way if he had done so. Here is a Catholic village with habits of life acquired from Portuguese times. Not only religion — that was a very small part of the matter — but habits mental and social.

And he belonged to the world that resisted such influences all

throughout and tried to remain on its own.¹⁰¹

He was part of a historical opposition, a passive rebellion, which the good and kind neighbors of his were not aware of.

There was an anger seething within him for which there was no immediate cause. He constantly bottled up that anger and remained calm and peaceful like the rest. Only his wife perhaps knew the devil that was within him.

He loved her very much, but quarrelled bitterly with her, but did not want anyone else to know it. He was attached to his image of a peaceful passive man.

There is no record in memory of any quarrel he had with anyone. That may be why he was always chosen as the umpire when Elle matches were played by teams of this village against teams of other villages. Attending to that task, he wore a coat and went about like a real judge.

Though what he did or said in real life was of no significance, his word was never challenged when he was the one judging a game. And everybody said that he gave absolutely correct verdicts.

When he was over fifty a rich lady asked him to look after a few acres of land belonging to her family. The land was in the jungle. He accepted this task immediately. He felt no sadness in leaving the village. Perhaps he wanted to be alone. Perhaps in that way he would not have to keep on adjusting to a situation he could not really get adjusted to.

In the jungle the roots of his past began to be watered as he was cultivating the rich woman's land. That part of the jungle became a fine vegetable plot. The coconut trees grew and after a few years bore fruit. He was now absolutely a part of his past. The memory of the years he had lived in the Catholic village was not of much meaning to him. A past of which he had no direct experience had more meaning.

Years went by. He grew old. He had no children. His wife was still

strong. One or two of her relatives, young men, came and helped in the work, and they put up a small hut and lived there.

These arrivals had angered the rich lady, he later learned. She did not call him or send any messages to him directly. Perhaps she could not do that to his face. But when she blamed him to others the message would reach him, as she would have known.

This unkindness hurt him a lot. He went to the rich lady's house and yelled at her. She did not say anything. Perhaps she felt sorry. Or maybe she was disturbed by the change that had come upon him. She later heard that he was going about blaming her and cursing her.

Everyone was surprised by his behavior!

Sometime later when his wife died people saw that he was very terrified. When the coffin was closed, he fainted. And within a few days after the seventh day Dane he became badly ill.¹¹

When he was very ill, the rich woman came and took him away. She had taken him to hospital, it was said. But when she demolished his little house and the hut, it was rumored that she had in fact taken him to a home for the aged run by some charitable organization and that he would never return.

But within a few weeks Konaiya returned. Having found his house demolished he went to see the rich woman. He was told that she had gone away for a few days.

He went to the parish priest at the church to complain. The priest allowed him to sleep at night in the corridor of the church. After a few days he began to purge and even got his clothing dirty. The priest took him to hospital where he got cured.

But he did not return again. He went back to the faraway village he had come from. As there was no one to receive him, he began to beg in the nearby town.

When Will They Be Free?

“Have we reached the dead end?”

Litus remained silent. It was too troublesome a question to answer in words. On the other hand, the answer was obvious.

Above all he was very tired, very tired.

Just outside there were orchids. That was the pastime of his friend.

Friendships between Catholic priests were usually very deep. Maybe something like friendships you built up when you lived in a residential university. Or when you work together for a common cause you feel very much — say, for example, for a revolutionary party, so long as you feel that you are doing the correct thing.

After suffering a heart attack in his late forties, Father Amarasinhe grew orchids because he wanted a quiet way of life. He had been given a small church to look after.

The orchids were tended by village girls who were thereby taught a domestic trade and were able to make some pocket money.

The church was in a place far away from Colombo; it was essentially rural but situated near a junction at the Kandy Road.

Litus had chosen for his retreat this place because above all he wanted to escape from his comrades of recent times. He could visualize the whole episode that would take place if they came. What they would say. What he could not say.

The art of bringing back a runaway comrade had a very simple procedure. He himself had done it with regard to others many times. But when a person wanted to run away finally he would make sure that he could not be easily approached or traced. More intelligent ones would even find some job abroad.

On the one hand, there is a reality you cannot run away from. You do not want to run away from it. On the other hand there was the absurdity of the proposed solution which you have come to realize.

But you are not to talk about the solution. If you do you become a reformist all at once. Anyway they will say you are really making an excuse to run away from reality.

But he had not wanted to run away from reality, the reality of his country. If he did he could have remained where he was — in the priesthood. He was quite comfortable as a priest, and he had good prospects. It was a matter of learning the tricks of the trade if he wanted to go higher. And even now, five years after leaving, he could go back. “Once a priest always a priest”.

Why should he run away anyway? This reality was nothing but his own reality too. Sometimes he was confused by what he heard about the intellectuals as people who are “outsiders”. Maybe in the West, he thought.

Every nerve of his brain was involved with the situation of the poor. That was not some conscious choice. Everybody who came from his background was like that — though most did not want to make it obvious, and some did not directly think about it at all. They merely acted and reacted instinctively. His reality and other people’s reality were not basically different. His confusion was their confusion too. Their confusion was his confusion too. What one is confused about generally shows where one is.

And will not the reality of poverty that exists in any village in Sri Lanka fail to confuse anyone with a brain? Poverty is no abstraction. It is something which eats into you, into your nerves, eyes, ears, anything that may be called the soul and body.

Poverty determines everything. The way you get angry. The way you feel ashamed. What makes you afraid. What makes it impossible for you to relax. How you act / react to everything.

Poverty makes the cynic and the brave man alike, if there is anything

called bravery.

Behind the tone of your speech, behind the confidence or lack of confidence in your gestures, behind your smile or lack of smile, the way you look at your children, the way they look at you, the way people take to religion or do not take to religion, behind all that, behind the real and the unreal, there is the reality of poverty.

And what was his village but a geographical boundary sustaining within itself a limbo of poverty?

Poverty was the purifier and the corrupter. Poverty was the total reality.

It was a village of fishermen close to Colombo. Their reality was written in their faces, bodies, expressions, way of walking, festivals and ceremonies.

Everyday was just the same.

That's where his father had spent his childhood, his father's father too, and he too. There had been few external changes. The depth of poverty was never touched. So when they speak of running away from reality what were they talking about?

His comrades were very confused too. But that was something that one was not supposed to admit. They made themselves believe they were very clear thinkers. In fact, they were the clearest thinkers of the nation. It was very unfortunate that the people were not following them. But someday they would.

All these thoughts have been there over and over again. And just now as he kept silent to the question posed by his friend those thoughts were there again.

"Well, I understand your position. Why not put up a fight inside?"

That was not a lie, Litus knew. Here is a man not easily willing to give up. What what chance was there for such a fight?

Between him and his friend there was a relationship that had gone on for years. They had contributed to each other's decisions in many ways, rather almost in every way in recent years.

They got to know each other after the insurrection of 1971, when suddenly all their generation began to think very intensely. He was 28, then, an assistant priest living at the archbishop's house. His friend who was a few years younger was a final year student of law and a leader of the student movement. He was preoccupied all the time, thinking all the time, talking all the time.

Inside his room in the arch-bishop's house they used to meet with others who would drop in and out as they had time. They discussed everything from Thomism to Marxism. The lunch would always be from the archbishop's table.

The resolutions for the university Catholic federation were often drafted there, some calling on the archbishop to dispossess himself and join the poor without just talking bullshit about the poor.

Despite such diversions they were very serious all the time, trying all the time to find out what would solve our people's problems.

That was about seven years ago. They had made many choices thereafter, but their relationship remained essentially the same.

His friend Joseph graduated from the university, joined the revolutionary league. He did not want to practice law, so he found an instructor's post in a university. He did not have much work, so he could devote his time to his league.

Litus followed everything they did. He read their paper, which was published twice a week, and went to their meetings, theoretical discussions, and from a distance followed their May Day rally, which was small and spirited.

Litus had heard that the leaders of this league were somewhat

suspicious of him because he was a priest. But their suspicion died away slowly. One day he decided to give up his robes and he joined the league.

It was a decision that caused great pain to his family, who were very proud of his being a priest.

His mother, who followed him in every decision in his life, who had always told him to work for the poor, could not understand why he had to give up being a priest to fight for the poor.

His mother had achieved her life's ambition the day he was ordained. And now he was to disappoint her in a very deep way.

But like many people of his generation he was willing to make big sacrifices. Lives of many young people ended up in ways very painful to their parents those days. For example, many died in the insurrection and many went to jail without committing crimes. Of course, these people were also tortured in jail as a result of which some had permanent disabilities.

Hoping against hope that the pain of his mother would be lessened he informed the Vicar General of his decision. The response was not what he had expected. He thought that the Vicar General would tell him not to go away. Instead he took a bottle of arrack and shared it with Litus and wished him well. The old man too, it was obvious, was very tired and unhappy.

All these details were known to Joseph. And almost every detail of what had happened each day for the next five years up to this moment when Litus has come in search of him to his priest friend's house, trying to depart from a situation in which he felt trapped.

Each day of the five years had been a busy one from early morning to late night. Paper printing, paper sales, organizing of locals, collection of funds, discussions everywhere, area committee and central committee meetings. He was busier than he was as a priest.

In between these jobs they would find time for meals and now and then a drink. There was not much money at any time but there was enough to live

day by day.

But deep inside Litus there was an unresolved question. A question arising from the limbo of poverty he saw in his childhood and has seen ever since. The same question which sent him to the seminary and later made him decide to leave the priesthood.

When will his people be free?

In the league there were people obsessed with the same problems. And deep inside them they had deep doubts, doubts as deep as those that were there among his priest friends.

Not that there was any hesitation to sacrifice. But are sacrifices ends in themselves? He must think this out for himself again. Yes, in his mind he had reached a dead end.

Joseph was an understanding friend, he knew. He had the same problem. He was even more committed than himself, Linus always thought, but he wanted to fight out things to the bitter end. Whatever be the outcome he would will his way, Litus was sure.

This was parting, no doubt. Break with someone who has shared your deepest thoughts and you bring in a loneliness which is hard to describe in words. You can live far away and for a long time and still be very deeply close.

That is not so when an ideological bond breaks. You don't become angry. You feel sad and lonely, knowing that you will never meet the same way again.

"I have got to go," Joseph said rising.

They could read each other's mind. But there was a sadness in Joseph's eyes which was unusual. He had forgotten to hide it the way he usually did.

Litus watched Joseph going toward the junction. His walk lacked the usual manner, the usual confidence. But he was carrying himself with dignity

as he always did.

Even if you are very very tired you'll still find it difficult to sleep if you are bothered about too many things. Zen masters have said eat when you eat and sleep when you sleep. But there were times when it was not so easy to do that.

The quietness of the surroundings and the comfort of the bed given to him by his priest friend brought more and more thoughts to Litus's mind instead of sleep.

The first clear thought that came to him was something like this:

During the last five years of my life I have spoken to thousands and thousands of people. Spoken to them in private and in public. By way of arguments and by other means. But what exactly was it that I was trying to tell them?

"Yes, now, Litus, answer," he told himself. In fact he challenged himself with some sort of internal smile.

"Absolutely nothing!" a third person from within him answered with even more humor.

"Well, I was genuine. I was committed. I was ready for any sacrifice," the first person to begin the conversation said, as if asking the other two inside him for some mercy.

"So what?" the other two asked at the same time and joined each other in a hearty laugh.

"If all that I had wanted was to speak to the people and in doing so I have not told them anything, what have I been doing?" he asked the other two, looking for some guidance as it were.

But there was no replay anymore. There was only more sleeplessness.

On the one hand, there was this inescapable reality of poverty. On the other hand, there was the desire to do something to end it. But there was no way to find out what that something was that one has got to do.

So there was a point at which even failures do not show how success could have been achieved.

So there is no way out of the zero point.

Litus continued to think while his priest friend happily slept.

Tourism Drive

Date: July 7, 1991

According to the popular view, Juli Hatha is a very bad day. People also speak of Mala Julia, dead July, to mean a deadly misfortune. (Editor's note)

Place: Military Headquarters, Tourism Branch

This is near the Galleface Green. The building first housed the first Parliament of Sri Lanka. The statues of all the Prime Ministers who are dead are still there. The statues are turning their backs to the building. They are looking at the Indian Ocean. There are many jokes as to why they are doing that. (Editor's note)

Topic: Drive to Promote Tourism

Attendance: Special Invitees Only

(Our notes about this meeting are from Arun Serasinghe, till recently a journalist. Having realized that journalism is not very attractive these days in Sri Lanka as the people who have come to matter do not read anything at all, he has decided to try tourism promotion for which people with sophisticated backgrounds are invited. His own comments are included within parentheses. Editor's note)

The audience was about ten. Nine women and myself. The age of the military offers very special privileges to smart women. Military men like to call themselves "Fighters and Lovers".

They are no longer the same military men you know. Say for example

the ones you may have known a year ago. (Who cared to know them those days, anyway?) They look smart now. They are all out to show that they are as good if not better than the ones who are turning their backs to the building now and better than even those who have not been brought there yet.

Things are explained to us briefly. The new policy on tourism. The place it has in the national policy, the very important place.

The military man explains why the old guys failed. The old guys were worried about public opinion. They did not give the tourists what the tourists wanted.

"You must allow them to be free," the military man says as he looks at the smart women with smiling eyes. ("Free" — they are learning to use the language now. They no longer use bad language to say a bad thing.)

"You must feel free to speak here," the military man says. "Nothing you say will be reported in the press". (That goes without saying. Now only what the military wants is published.) "And as you all have been screened and found to be acceptable, even your disagreements will not be misinterpreted."

(Well, I am not sure about that).

"Now to introduce the subject I present to you Miss Wijepala".

At this point one of the women in the audience walks up. Very elegant. Very smart looking. Real Colombo 7 type.¹²⁾ (It is not difficult for me to recognize her. Not long ago this Miss Wijepala was Mrs. Wijetunga. A university graduate married to a leading businessman. Divorced. The case was somewhat sensational. Filed by the husband on the grounds of adultery. She resisted. But the court granted it. She was later seen in big hotels, mostly with foreigners, and thereafter operated as a madame connected with the most luxurious hotels).

"As you know," Miss Wijepala says, "there are many countries that thrive on tourism. But our tourism has died down. We must ask ourselves

why. It is very simple. One of the subjects I studied was economics. (She looked at us in the audience with a superior look.) It is all about supply and demand. You must give the tourists what they demand. Do you think that they are coming all the way to our country to see the mountains? No, they come to see us". (The women in the audience warmly joined her with smiles all over).

"But, of course," Miss Wijepala continues, "we have a psychological factor to overcome just now. People are afraid of this country now. That is due to the mishandling of our public relations. What we do in our country is our own business."

(The military man nods approvingly)

"What is the use of the outside world knowing that. Whatever happens in the countryside we must make it appear everything is normal. That means that normal services are available at all times in Colombo..

This approach will also help to keep too inquisitive foreigners otherwise busy, and will attract foreign tourist agencies, and tourists will again say that his country is paradise indeed."

"Any questions?" the military man asks as if he had just finished a briefing of junior officers.

A girl who is seated in front has a comment. "Well, our rural girls don't like this, you know".

Miss Wijepala is on her feet again. It does not seem a very strange comment to her. "Yes, I should have spoken about it. Rural girls are our main resource."

(They have killed the rural young men. And now they want to sell the rural young women).

"We must convince the rural girls. We must win them over. We must train them. We must make an art of this. By we, I mean we, the upper class women who have the culture, we must take the initiative".

There were no more questions.

(The smart women seemed happy).

The meeting was adjourned.

The Old Man and the Canal

The old man had sat by the canal most of the time each day for the last ten years or so. He was eighty two years old, and had given up work. The canal, just in front of his house, was a few centuries old.

All his life he had lived close to the canal, or, shall we say, connected with the canal. He was a washerman, and so were all his neighbors.

Officially the area where they lived was a part of a village. But, bound by a collective feeling, these neighbors had thought of themselves as a single village for a long time. In fact, there were boundaries written in the minds of the people which were not found on maps.

There was the area near the sea which belonged to the Karawa fishermen. The fishermen and the Rahda washermen were generally friends.¹³⁾

There were deadly fights between fishermen, ending up in murders. One death from one family led to another death from another family, and it went on like that.

But the washermen were united. They helped the fishermen whenever they could. Everybody feared to provoke the washermen. They would stand up to a man, and be merciless. Only they resisted the first capitalist of the area when he tried to grab the poor people's lands forcibly. Their resistance took the form of guerrilla warfare, and was told as a legend.¹⁴⁾

Outside such occasions, the fishermen were very peaceful people, always carrying within themselves a very strong sense of justice.

There was another group of people living in a section close to the church. They claimed to belong to the farmers' caste. But there were no pad-

dy fields anywhere near there. They were just a few families, but they owned most of the land. They kept aloof from the rest of the village. Some of the men worked as clerks in some Colombo offices, but to the other villagers they created the impression that they were doing some big jobs in the city.

In fact, these people who claimed to belong to the Govigama, the highest caste, were the most insecure people in the village.¹⁵¹ And they were the ones who created most of the trouble among the people.

This brief description of the village shows the reader the only world that our old man really knew and cared about.

As Independence was granted to Sri Lanka in 1948, we may calculate the age of our old man as forty one then. This means that he had lived forty one years as a subject of the British Empire.

He had begun to work early. He married early. When his first wife died giving birth to his first child, a beautiful baby girl, he had remarried her sister. By the time of Freedom he had all but the last child, altogether seven, of whom two had died young.

Despite all that, this man, who was very fond of his memories, hardly ever spoke of the Britishers or their rule. Not that he was a fool. Though his education was almost all informal, he had a very sharp mind, supple enough to grasp the nuances of life. He was really trying to forget that part of his memory because it was too painful to remember it. In the deep area of the unconscious, where he felt the hurt most deeply, he buried the British.¹⁶¹

In silence and in obscurity he had watched everything. Not that he had done so purposefully or deliberately. But it had happened the same way as it happens to the tortoise when it puts its head inside its shell. Then it reads everything from the sounds and with other parts of the body than the eyes. When everything is over it will walk again as if it had never felt any danger.

In such a memory it was not only what was experienced directly that

was stored, but also what was told by the earlier generations through their direct sufferings.¹⁷⁾ If there is a thing called collective memory of a common threat, the old man's generation had one. But they normally lived as if they had none.

The old man had told his children and his grandchildren, and other children that there were lots of fruits in the jungle when he was young. He would tell how he plucked a big ripe jack fruit from the jungle, ate as much as he could, and left the balance for the birds to eat.

He told about his wooden boat by which he went to the river in the evening to fish, with a friend always, and about how much fish they used to catch and how some big fish were caught now and then.

He would tell of the Samba rice and Dal, which was cheap in those days.

He would also tell of the funny clothes the rich people used to wear and of all sorts of funny things that happened at the race course where he and some of his friends had gone whenever they could.¹⁸⁾

Even when he did not tell about these things he would recall them over and over again as he watched the high tide and the low tide of the canal, month after month, year after year.

The canal was his place of peace, till something suddenly happened. Within the short period of about one month the canal made the old man restless, and finally he avoided it as if it were some evil place.

One day when he walked to his place near the canal there was a large crowd looking at the canal, and others were coming towards the place.

There was the body of a man in the canal.

Though not usual, sometimes bodies used to float in it, when someone had drowned or committed suicide or at times was murdered.

Some villagers would soon take the body out and then inform the police, and that would be the end of the matter.

But in the weeks preceding this event there had been rumors of the army killing young people. Nobody got into the canal to take this body out. It went upward at the high tide and came back at the low tide.

The old man did not go near the canal to see it. But he was aware of everything in the tortoise fashion. He was a good sleeper, but that day he could not sleep. When he went into sleep a little he would see the body of his young son floating in the canal, and he woke up quickly. Again and again this would happen, till the sunrise, and then, of course, he could not sleep, as if it were some sort of shame to sleep when the sun was shining bright in the morning.

Next day he sat in front of his house, but not so close to the canal. The morning went all right. But in the afternoon another body floated by. That night he awoke with a sharp cry. He could vividly remember the dream which made him scream. He saw the huge statue of Christ, which was kept in a resting position after the Good Friday Passion service, floating in the canal. He and his young son were on either side of the Christ's body, like the two thieves.

In the weeks that followed there were many bodies, and on two occasions four and five bodies on the same day.

The old man dreamed of everyone whom he had known in childhood, everyone he had loved, floating in the canal. A frightened look began to appear in his face. He did not talk at all.

An ancient memory had begun to waken in him. He dreamed of foreign looking people running riot at his village with swords and guns, killing infants and newly born babies, and torturing others.

He was not seen near the canal again.

Eighteen Headless Bodies

The professor is on his way to the campus of the University of Peradeniya.

He has been away in Colombo because the campus is closed most of the time.

But he cannot be away from the University for long. That is where he had studied (that was the best time, of course), where he met his wife, found employment (which he never changed), built his reputation.

Thirty years or so. All of his adult intellectual life.

Most University graduates become intellectually adult rather quickly after graduation, when they begin to deal with the “outside” world.

It takes a longer time for those who take to academic life.

The Professor has no idea that he is going to see a very special exhibition today in this great place of learning.

But he can sense a very unusual tension as he turns his car onto the road leading to the campus.

Tension was nothing unusual to the campus. So if he feels something unusual there is something really unusual.

He is not the sort of man who would wait to ask others. Events have come and gone in this University, even some very bad ones. So what was there to be afraid of? Going to the heart of the matter — that was what he was trained to do in his academic work.

The Professor pushes himself through the crowd. No one really gives way. No one takes any notice of him. That is unusual too given the recognition he had in this campus.

As he gets closer he tries to look over the crowd. But he is too short. It was better to push further ahead. Finally he is there, and he takes his first look.

He instinctively shook his head. Was he going to faint? For a few

moments he did not know what was happening. "What the hell!" Someone had broken the silence. The Professor woke again hearing the yell. Everyone was looking at him. It was the cry like that of a demon. But everyone was staring at him.

Then someone held him by the arm. "Sir, see..." Someone was pointing to the pond.

The Professor felt himself moving. He was now moving ahead of the crowd.

The way he has lost his fear and his usual shyness is strange. He kneels there. He touches a very cold object that looks like a human head.

He takes it closely to his chest. He runs his fingers through the hair tenderly. He touches the cheeks and kisses them with a strange sense of reverence — as he used to do as a child on Good Friday, when he kissed the feet of Jesus after His body was taken down from the cross after His death.

The Professor looks at the young face. Yes, it is a face he has seen before. Several times before, he recalls.

The Professor went from one head to another.

He was oblivious of the rest of the world as it were. A just don't care attitude was taking over him.

Each face is the same. Someone seen many times on the campus but whom he does not personally know.

Why did he not know them? he questions himself.

There were policemen about the place. They were also staring at him. He did not want to look at their faces anymore. Deep inside he felt he was not afraid of them.

He rises and walks away from the place deliberately. He feels he is not the same man who left his home and is now walking back.

Anyway, he does not want to be the same man again.

NOTES

- 1) In Sri Lanka, people do not generally know about samurai and do not equate samurai with murderers. In "Albert the Murderer" Basil Fernando does not treat Albert as a murderer. The villagers in the story do treat him as such because of some aspect of themselves that they are afraid of. ("Minimaru Albert" is Sinhala for Alfred the Murderer).
- 2) The villagers are vindictive towards Albert's children, expressing another aspect of Sri Lankan Sinhala culture in which, according to Fernando, tolerance is much talked about although intolerance is widely practiced.
- 3) Albert challenges the villagers because he is so different from them. In contrast to their passiveness and resignation to fate, he searches for action. The villagers fear action; Albert does not.
- 4) Fernando has commented that during feudal times social life in Sri Lanka was slow. There were few big landlords or wholly impoverished peasants. There was little aggressive exploitation of nature. Nor was there a manifestation of creativity such as there was in China, India and Japan. Sri Lankan Buddhism discouraged expressive forms of art. This situation was followed by a long period of colonialism that continuously and thoroughly suppressed the people's frank and full expression. The worst aspect of this condition was that "People learned to retire to their souls, as all forms of action were followed by severe punishments, often death".
- 5) Some people wished that Albert were dead because his presence is provocative. Albert's presence questions the way society maintains its so-called balance. Basil Fernando notes that many people have recently fled from Sri Lanka out of fear. "Who wants to kill them and for what reason? Not for any crime they have committed, but because their presence is a challenge to the so-called balance that keeps the mechanism of fear and intimidation safely working".
- 6) In Sinhala usage it is common to add "Aiya" (literally elder brother) to the name when addressing an adult male. The names "Konaiya" and "Manaiya" are of foreign origin and lack Sinhala meaning.
- 7) By "those days" Fernando refers to a generation fast disappearing in Sri Lanka, his father's generation, now displaced by modern education and circumstances. When

Konaiya, thus displaced, goes back to his "own" village, there is no one to receive him, and he becomes a beggar in order to survive.

- 8) Basil Fernando has said that not long ago there lived in Sri Lanka a generation that did not attach as much significance to time as people do today. "Life to them was one single event, as it were".
- 9) The setting of "Konaiya" is a Catholic suburb close to Colombo. From there to Buddhist Matara is far away geographically and culturally, in the story. Modern transportation has brought both places closer, about three hours journey by car. Konaiya's generation either walked all the way or went by bullock-drawn cart.
- 10) Basil Fernando explains his concept of resistance in this way: A very learned Catholic priest who was murdered about two years ago, allegedly by members of the armed forces, told Fernando a story about Buthala, a village in the hill country, where he devoted the last few years of his life living close to the people. In 1818 there was a great rebellion against the British colonialization in the Buthala area. This rebellion was most inhumanely crushed. The priest said that in the 1980s he discovered in the people of Buthala a memory of the old resistance.
- 11) Dane = Sinhala for alms giving.
- 12) Colombo 7 is an upper middle class area of Colombo. In "Colombo 7 type", Fernando is following the lead of Sinhala novels such as *Colomba Hathe Nonala* (Colombo Seven Women) and *Sankara Nonala* (Disturbed Ladies) concerning upper class Sri Lankan women ready to dance to the tune of foreigners and who had little love for the country or the culture of Sri Lanka. According to Fernando, even women of the upper class in India preserved Indian culture as they refused to change their ways to adjust to the British colonizers' ways, but the same cannot be said of the upper class women of Sri Lanka. Fernando admits there were exceptions and that he is using a type well-known in Sinhala fiction.
- 13) Both Rahda and Karawa were considered "low" caste.
- 14) Fishermen went to sea in fragile wooden boats and spent much of their lives on the deep seas in very hard conditions. When they were back on shore they fought hard among themselves. Perhaps the tremendous insecurity they felt at sea made them also feel insecure on land?

Washermen were exposed to greater humiliation. Most of the time they manifested

greater passiveness. But when they acted they acted together with great ferocity. They were feared for this.

- 15) One reason for the insecurity of the “high” caste people was that they used their wits against ignorant people to grab the lands of the poor on the cheap. They knew that many people did not like them, and they knew that it was not safe for them to be too close to people they had cheated.
- 16) Mental suppression, Basil Fernando has said, is the most common psychological phenomenon in Sri Lanka and the most long standing legally from colonial times. Now, he says, the local police and the military are re-enforcing this phenomenon in cruel and brutal ways.
- 17) Fernando says these people have suffered continuous “cruel and inhuman treatment” for over 500 years. Of course, he admits, there have been intervals of peace.
- 18) Funny, because at times these clothes were imitations of British upper class dress of those days, with local additions. There was an expression, “Gentleman under clothes”, because some wore under their local garb trousers that could be seen. It was also part of local vanity to wear medals received from the British.